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SUBJECT: Millenium Science Initiative Delegation Urges
Cooperation at Meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Khiem

1. Summary: The DCM accompanied a visiting delegation of prominent American scientists to call on Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem March 23 regarding establishing Centers for Excellence under the Millenium Science Initiative (MSI) in Vietnam. The delegation, led by Dr. Harold Varmus, Nobel laureate and president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, emphasized the need for such centers to renew Vietnam's focus on the basic sciences, provide a home to returning researchers and help Vietnam's scientists engage more deeply with the international scientific community. The delegation called for the GVN to create an interagency secretariat to administer the MSI, which would report directly to the Prime Minister. End Summary.

2. On March 23, a delegation of American scientists led by Dr. Harold Varmus of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and 1989 Nobel laureate in medicine for his work on the cellular origins of the oncogene of a chicken retrovirus, met with Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem. The DCM and Assistant Public Affairs Officer accompanied Varmus and the delegation to the meeting with the DPM. The delegation spent a week visiting fifteen universities and research institutes throughout Vietnam. Also joining the delegation were Dr. Chung Kim, physics professor at Johns Hopkins University; Dr. John Hopcroft, Computer Science Professor at Cornell University; Ms. Arlen Hastings, Executive Director of the Science Initiative Group (SIG); Mr. Frank Jao, newly appointed chairman of the Vietnam Education Foundation; Dr. Cuong Nguyen, Engineering Dean at Catholic University; and Dr. Vo Van Toi, biomedical engineering professor at Tufts University.

3. Varmus thanked the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) for its support of the delegation's visit and noted that Vietnam is now at a time in its development of science and technology (S&T) infrastructure where it would be appropriate to broaden its activities and place more emphasis on the basic underlying sciences instead of narrowly focusing on applied science. During the delegation's visit to major research institutions in Vietnam over the previous five days, Varmus reported that without exception, the scientists they had met are energetic and enthusiastic, but they are currently operating under a rigid directive to apply their research purely for practical benefit. The research of importing, replicating and applying technologies created abroad limits technological innovation and prevents the nurturing of basic research underpinning the applications, Varmus argued.

4. The MSI is small in scale, but has the potential to have a disproportionately large impact on the development of science, Varmus said. It would do so by introducing international best practices in scientific research including a transparent, competitive selection process involving international peer review and thereby setting high standards for scientific excellence in Vietnam, he explained.

5. He also emphasized that the long-term sustainability of Vietnamese R&D enterprises will depend on strengthening science across the basic-applied spectrum. Areas of focus in the MSI include the life sciences, information sciences, pure and applied mathematics and materials sciences. The MSI's Centers of Excellence could become strong research and training grounds for Vietnamese scientists, with funding coming from the World Bank, the Ford Foundation and other multinational organizations. Varmus also called for the creation of an interagency secretariat in Vietnam to administer the MSI and report directly to the Prime

Minister, thereby raising the project's visibility to the highest levels.

16. The DCM echoed Varmus' points, underscoring the Ambassador's and the entire country team's support for this project. He also said that the concept fits into the broad goals of strengthening bilateral relations, especially in the areas of education, science and health.

17. The DPM responded that S&T is of great interest to the GVN and he understands the need to put more emphasis on the fundamental sciences. He went on to admit that the basic sciences have been ignored to some extent, but that applied science is still a high priority. He also acknowledged that Vietnam's inadequate attention to the basic sciences over the past thirty years has been counterproductive, decreasing innovation and creativity. However, he countered that the GVN has taken several solid steps to correct these tendencies, including strengthening two national research centers, creating two multidisciplinary national universities in Hanoi and HCMC and establishing a Science Fund for basic sciences. The DPM expressed his strong support for the Centers for Excellence because they would pool resources to train new talent in the sciences as well as create an environment in which Vietnamese scientists would be able to link up with scientists around the world. He agreed that the current working group at MOST would fully cooperate on this project.

18. Varmus responded that the MSI has experiences in many countries and the delegation would continue to consult with MOST officials on a plan appropriate to Vietnam's conditions. He reemphasized the importance of investing in the basic sciences and sought the DPM and PM's full-fledged support. He and other delegation members stressed that Vietnamese scientists and researchers currently in the U.S. and Europe need to bring their talents back to Vietnam and the Centers of Excellence could be one avenue where they can continue to thrive upon their return. VEF graduates currently in the U.S. could also be included into the matrix of these centers.

19. Next steps: The SIG Team and MOST Core Team will work together to draft a proposal for Centers of Excellence in S&T in Vietnam. This proposal will then be submitted by July 2005 to the Prime Minister for approval, after which MOST can apply to the World Bank for funding under the MSI model.

BOARDMAN